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SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KCOR](#) [KJUS](#) [LG](#)

SUBJECT: NEW ANTI-CORRUPTION BUREAU CHIEF: NORMUNDS VILNITIS

REF: 08 RIGA 386

Classified By: Charge d' Affaires a.i. Bruce Rogers, reason 1.4 (b)

¶1. (C) Summary: Following an eight-month gap Normunds Vilnitis, businessman and former high-level law enforcement official, has been named new Anti-Corruption Bureau (KNAB) Chief. Despite criticism of his qualifications and selection process, Vilnitis has quickly taken the reigns of the KNAB, openly discussing his appointment and goals with the press. He has left key staff in place and identifies corruption in the private sector and international finance as his main focus. Vilnitis has come across positively, but it remains to be seen whether he can rebuild the damaged KNAB into an effective organization. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Since Aleksejs Loskutovs' dismissal as KNAB Chief in June 2008 (reftel), the agency was without a leader. After initial concern of the organization's ability to function and resolve the internal problems that brought Loskutovs down, controversy ensued surrounding what process should be used to choose the new Chief. NGOs and others were concerned that politicians would place someone in the position who would be either ineffective or subject to political influence. To address this, then-Prime Minister Godmanis instituted a public competition for the post. Seventeen candidates participated, most notably Juta Strike, KNAB deputy and second-time candidate for the job. The open process probably kept some well-qualified people from applying. They didn't want the embarrassment of not being chosen.

¶3. (C) The selection process dragged on for eight months through public and political debates. Godmanis' announcement that no one currently in the KNAB would be chosen as the new Chief thus making Strike ineligible, caused outcries from NGOs and opposition political parties. Finally Normunds Vilnitis, a businessman, lawyer, former Latvian Police Academy and College of Law lecturer and high-level law enforcement official in the drug enforcement and organized crime departments, got the job. On March 12 Parliament unanimously appointed Vilnitis as the new KNAB Chief.

¶4. (C) Since his appointment, Vilnitis has been actively explaining his vision for the KNAB and identifying the challenges it faces. Although he has publicly stated that he does not intend to make sweeping staffing changes, his biggest concern is the significant budget cuts that the KNAB will have to make, and how that will influence the agency's effectiveness as many of these cuts will come from salaries. Vilnitis' consistent message is that the KNAB's recent work in the absence of a director has been good, and that it will continue. Focus points will be corruption in the private sector and international finance. He confirmed that goal in a meeting with the Charge, and stated that he has a strong interest in maintaining good cooperation with the U.S., especially in the area of international asset recovery and mutual legal assistance. He also expects to seek help with training and resources.

¶5. (C) Comment: Vilnitis has made a good initial impression on his staff and the public, despite earlier skepticism. His

willingness to speak at length with the press has given the vision of a leader who is open about the state of the KNAB, good and bad, and supports its track record, while still looking to the future. Vilnitis has management experience that the KNAB dearly needs. But the KNAB isn't out of rough water. The eight-month gap in leadership has taken its toll on the organization, delaying plans for internal restructuring and reducing its capacity to work effectively. We hope for Vilnitis' success, but still fear, as Prosecutor General Maizitis previously told us, that the political forces aiming to hobble the KNAB permanently have already done just that. End Comment.

ROGERS